

# The Wonder of Being Cheerful

Robin Ghosh

**Abstract:** *In his best-selling book. Anatomy of an illness, Norman Cousins to some extent enlightened the medical profession. The book is a fascinating story of how the author 'laughed his way' out of a progressive crippling illness that doctors believed irreversibly degenerative. In August 1964, with a slight fever, the author flew home from the USSR to the USA after an official visit. His fever and achiness of body rapidly worsened and within a few days he was hospitalized, unable almost to move his limbs. The doctors diagnosed Collagen, a systemic disease of the body's connective tissue. Asked about his chances, the doctors said frankly that recovery would require a miracle. His chances of living through it were one in five hundred. But Cousins was a courageous man. The shattering news, instead of trapping him in a state of utter despair, set him thinking and produced quite a different reaction. He was at this point taking maximum doses of pain killing drugs, codeine, colchicines and sleeping pills, but mainly phenylbutazone and aspirin, and felt 'run over by a truck' in every joint. Cousins also survived some lapses in hospital care, which should have been better. He decided to fight the adverse circumstances. First of all, he reasoned that if negative emotions wear a patient down, positive emotions must have the power to bring about salutary changes. If depression, anxiety, helplessness and stress could cause incalculable damage to body and mind, by the same token, cheerfulness, faith, love, and hope must have their reverse effects. With this positive philosophy and a determinism to buck up his optimism. Cousins took the responsibility of getting well into his own hands.*

**Keywords:** Commonsense, Life force, Place boy, prescriptions, legendary, strange

## 1. Research Methods

It is implemented in a proper way. In his book Eollin's has expressed his view on common sense convictions of getting well and he took the responsibility on getting will in his own hands.

### Commonsense Convictions

Acting on his commonsense convictions plus some health tips, he immediately reduced his heavy dosages of *phenylbutazone* and *aspirin* which were producing unpleasant side effects and impairing the function of the adrenal glands. To revitalize the body's defences he began to take heavy doses of vitamin C (*ascorbic acid*). Cousins tells us that with the cooperation of nurses and his doctor, he also began to keep himself in a morale-boosting milieu. He watched hilarious comic films, read or had read to him funny books and stories, and tried to keep himself in the best possible mental frame. The effect, he says of laughter and exhilaration of mood was profound. Anxiety and feeling of body pain lessened to a considerable extent. He seemed to realize the priceless wisdom in the adage, "Laughter is the best medicine". Within a few weeks he was completely off drugs and sleeping pills and could sleep well for long hours. He was up again after a few months, out on the golf course and tennis green, and returned to his journalism and piano playing. His recovery seemed almost a miracle and astounded medical circles. "I have learned," confesses Norman Cousins, "never to underestimate the capacity of the human mind and body to regenerate even when the prospects seem most wretched."

### Life Force

"The life-force may be the least understood force on earth. William James said that human beings tend to live too far within self-imposed limits. 'It is possible that these limits will recede when we respect more fully the natural drive of the human mind and body toward perfectibility and regeneration. Protecting and cherishing that natural drive may well represent the finest exercise of human freedom'."<sup>1</sup>

The life-force which Norman Cousins speaks of is the little wave of *Prana*. Vivekananda said, "From thought down to the lowest force, everything is but the manifestation of *Prana*, ....This little wave of the *Prana* which represents our own energies, mental and physical, is nearest to us of all the waves of the infinite ocean of *Prana*,"<sup>2</sup> *Prana* is the name of the Energy of the universe. Mind is the great instrument for using as well as wasting the *Prana*.

'Placebo medicine' helped draw the attention of scientists to the unusual power of the mind. The use of these dummy medicines, called placebos (usually sugar-coated milk-powder pills) perhaps goes back as far as medical history. When used in the place of actual drugs (unknowingly by the patients) in the treatment of all types of diseases and disorders, even including drug addiction, placebos very often produce all the beneficial effects of real drugs, without the side-effects. However, they have been known to product side-effects and violent reactions too. Till now it is a great mystery how placebos do their work. Only this much is known, that placebos do indeed seem to trigger mechanisms in the body that anaesthetize pain, even of postoperative wounds, seasickness, headaches, coughs and anxiety. Other conditions affected by placebos reported by medical researchers are arthritis, blood cell count, respiratory rates, vasomotor function, peptic ulcers, hay fever, hypertension and spontaneous remission of warts. Experimenters have shown that placebos are able to activate the body's own endomorphic system, releasing 'internal morphine' – the body's own anaesthesia and suppress pain. "The most valuable physician," writes Norman Cousins – "to a patient and to a society – knows how to distinguish effectively between the large number of patients who can get well without heroic intervention and the much smaller number who can't."<sup>3</sup>

### Placebo Prescription

In large numbers of patients the placebo prescription instills needed confidence and triggers biochemical processes in the body. It is the robust confidence and the desire to get well that makes incredible things happen, and not mere intake of powerful drugs. Whatever mind wishes the body

translates into reality. Just so, persistent worries and anxieties do not just vanish on their own without leaving scars and wear on the organism. But robust health does not necessarily indicate intelligent and rational mind. Those who do heavy physical labour everyday often have disease-free well-muscled bodies but mostly pass through life with little mental or cultural development. The important point is, good health is an invaluable asset and should diligently be taken care of. It naturally presupposes the healthy and happy state of mind.

In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Caesar's remarks about Cassius, who was the main conspirator in the downfall and assassination of the emperor, reflect profound psychology. Caesar had heard about the conspiracy and was already wary of Cassius. Mark Antony, the trusted lieutenant of the emperor, tried to reassure him: "Fear him not, Caesar, he is not dangerous: he is a noble Roman and well given." Caesar replied:

He is a great observer, and he looks  
Quite through the deeds of men; he loves no plays,  
As thou dost, Antony; he hears no music. Seldom he smiles,  
and smiles in such a sort As if he mock'd himself, and  
scorned his spirit.

That could be moved to smile at anything. ...Such men ...  
are very dangerous. (Act I scene ii)

The man that either does not laugh or smile or love plays and music is not only an unhappy man but a saddist. His nature is destructive, and wherever he goes he spreads a pall of gloom. Happiness is the music of life, bereft of it life is a melancholy pilgrimage. The Biblical proverb says, "He that is of merry heart hath a continual feast." The merry heart not only heals the body but blows off anguish, anxiety, tension and fatigue. A hearty laugh for a tired man works like a tonic, rejuvenating his whole system. The healing power of laughter, down the ages, has caught hold on the attention of physicians, philosophers and politicians. In the olden days, in India, every king's court was adorned by an intelligent jester (*vidusaka*). Employing his gift of wit and wisdom prudently, the jester relieved the ruler of mental stress. The king used to spend some time with his court jester reveling in fun and frolic. In the celebrated Sanskrit dramas of Kalidasa, Bana, Bhavabhuti, and others, we invariably find the interesting character of *vidusaka*, like Shakespeare's *Falstaff*, adding spice to the whole plot. Those who scoff at humour and laughter as signs of frivolous mind commit a grave error and miss something.

The medical profession has been taking an animated interest in the effect of laughter. In Western countries many conferences and seminars have been convened to assess its positive therapeutic value. Laughter has been called 'internal jogging'. Dr. Annette Goodheart, a psychotherapist who teaches laughter therapy, says that her entire therapy is based on the premise: "We don't laugh because we are happy; we are happy because we laugh." As Yale University experiments by Gary Schwartz and others have brought new evidence that by changing the muscle patterns of the face, one can alter the inner moods. Dr. Goodheart buttresses the same idea when she says we are

happy because we laugh. Her observation on American women is still interesting. Why do women usually live eight years longer than men? American society approvers of giggling and laughter among girls and women, but ridicules smiling males-says she. Is that the reason why Western clergymen put on so solemn and serious faces and avoid laughing in public? Swami Vivekananda, a child of bliss, was chided for his infectious cheerfulness and spontaneous laughter by the guardians of the Church. "What business," thundered the Swami, "have you with clouded faces? It is terrible. If you have a clouded face do not go out that day, shut yourself up in your room. What right have you to carry this disease out into the world?"<sup>4</sup> Even the Bible proverb says, "A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance; but by sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken." What a dreadful life it is to keep away deliberately from mirth and joy as if they are contagious diseases!

A number of hospitals have made provision for laughing rooms. In these laughing rooms patients are helped to spill over their good humour while watching comic films, books and cartoons. Several volumes of R. K. Laxman's cartoon quips are, indeed, hazardous to depression. Albert Schweitzer, it is said, to reduce the rigours of the hot and humid climate of equatorial Africa, where his hospital was located, made use of humour therapy on his staff. This therapy worked wonders on his young doctors and nurses, invigorating their sagging spirits and taut nerves. Everyone looked forward to mealtimes at which this venerable old man would unleash waves of laughter through his amusing anecdotes and witty remarks. After meals the staff would go out refreshed and in jovial moods to attend to their duties. Dr. Schweitzer knew the prophylactic effect of mirth and music on the chemistry of the brain in addition to modern medicine. Cheerfulness, it is certain, spawns biochemical changes. How it does so is being investigated in a number of research institutions. Socrates, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Teresa of Avila, Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and his brother disciples, Sri Ramana Maharshi and Gandhiji, to name a few, all possessed a deep sense of humour. Sri Rama Krishna outshone all of them. His sparkling wit and humour, witty stories and brilliant mime and mimicry used to make his disciples and devotees roll on the ground bursting with laughter. Such was the magic of this king of ecstasy. The Gospel of Sri Rama Krishna in respect of this cheer and humour, also is a treasure. St. Francis used to call his brother friars in the Order 'Jester's of the Lord.' They all wanted to turn a smiling face to God and men.

Edison, a legendary figure in modern science, was reported to have collected juicy jokes and quips. Following his death his desk was found stuffed with magazine clippings and pieces of paper inscribed with jokes and stories. Many American presidents employed well-known humourists to spice their dull speeches with fun. Some were great humourists like Lincoln, and Lincoln himself used to rock with laughter reading Orpheus Kerr and Artemus Ward. There is an anecdote about Lincoln who was not a good looking person. Once a Philadelphia delegation went to meet him and they introduced one of their members: "He has been good enough to paint and present to our conference room a most beautiful portrait of yourself." President Lincoln paused a little and turning to the painter

said, "I presume sir, in painting the portrait you took your idea of me from my principles and not from my person." Men of wisdom, down the centuries, have known that laughter costs nothing, instead gives much. Hilarity, fun and exhilaration obliterate national stiffness and pull down the wall that separates individuals. Comedians and humour writers like Woody Allen, Charlie Chaplin, Mark Twain, P. G. Wodehouse, Stephen Leacock, James Herriot, and many others from different countries have knit mankind into one family. Laughter reminds us we are all one. "This I conceive," said Lin Yutang, the famous writer, "to be the chemical function of humour : to change the character of our thought." It is rightly said, "Laughter is the shortest distance between two people." But it has to be cultured and nurtured.

### **Most of the people suffer from moroseness, depression, insecurity, fear and so on?**

Why most of the people suffer from moroseness, depression, insecurity, fear and so on? To opulent or poor there seems to be no escape from the net of unhappiness. Are these inevitable existential problems? Is this the final truth – that as long as one lives on this planet, one has no choice but to suffer? If the answer is affirmative then life would be a curse instead of a blessing. There are, before our eyes, shining examples of men and women, even in modern times, who have shown how to free oneself from misery and anguish. Infatuation with self-importance, undue concern for petty happenings in one's life, exaggerated self-limiting opinions, and unfettered fantasies cause much of our misery. Conceptualizing about life-that it should be like this or should not be like that, acts as a hurdle in the path to mental peace. Misery is the product of the mind. A mind educated in a lopsided way, adversely conditioned produces distress and turmoil. It is an exercise in futility to look for meaning or purpose in life in the world of objects and emotions, however sentimental. When the old ways do no pay off, people seek the help of psychotherapists to suggest some new illusions so as to find durable security in their dream-life. "The seeker," writes Sheldon Kopp, "comes in hope of finding something definite, something permanent, something unchanging upon which to depend. He is offered instead the reflection that life is just what it seems to be – a changing, ambiguous, ephemeral mixed bag. It may often be discouraging, but it is ultimately worth it, because that is all there is."<sup>5</sup>

Desire for prolonged life, or perennial youthfulness, or an insatiable thirst forever for pleasures is nothing but wishful thinking, childish dreaming. Mankind has, for millennia, been searching for this Golden Fleece. Everyone thinks that he would get it ultimately. Even when an inescapable aging process sets in, sapping the organism of its vitality, even when senile dementia creeps in, and even when all dreams are shattered by the harsh realities of the world, man hangs on desperately to fleeting pleasures. He hopefully longs for medical giants to come to his rescue, to prolong his life or forestall the death of the body indefinitely. This thirst to continue is never quenched. Thomas Browne, a seventeenth century physician and author, rightly remarked: "The long habit of living indisposed us to dying." People have as much abhorrence for talking about death as for thinking about it. The dead bodies are removed from hospitals in

Western countries at dead of night so that nobody can see. People detest any inadvertent discussion about death. "These days," writes a famous biologist, Lewes Thomas, "the habit has become addiction: we are hooked on living; the tenacity of its grip on us, and ours on it, grows in intensity. We cannot think of giving it up, even when living loses its zest-even when we have lost the zest for zest. ...If we ever do achieve freedom from most of today's diseases, or even complete freedom from disease, we will perhaps terminate by drying out and blowing away on a light breeze, but we will still die."<sup>6</sup>

### **Abstract**

Modern medical technology may put death off for longer periods. But longevity does not vouchsafe happy life. "We hanker to go on," observes Lewis Thomas.

"even in the face of plain evidence that long, long lives are not necessarily pleasurable in the kind of society we have arranged thus far. We will be lucky if we can postpone the search for new technologies for a while, until we have discovered some satisfactory things to do with the extra time."<sup>7</sup>

Many therapists and doctors' succinct advice to glum-faced patients and to those in mortal fear is, "Don't take your life too seriously-it's temporary." How true the statement is! Once this idea of the body's temporal nature and rather short earthly existence takes root in the mind, one's mental perspective changes, gets broadened and mellowed. Instead of life's being a colourless melodrama, hidden springs of joy, hitherto unknown, are unlocked. Instead of considering themselves heroes of a high tragedy, people become willing participants in life's joyful adventure. When the temporariness of life is imprinted upon the mind, one looks at his own fortunes and misfortunes and events of the world in a non-attached way. This 'new view' not only burns off all suffering but brings about a mysterious exhilaration. In fact true living is dying to all attachments, all yesterdays – unburdening oneself from the 'sense' of possession – 'this belongs to me; that belongs to me'. In a temporary life nothing belongs to us, including one's own body. When Narendranath first met Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar, he sang a Brahmo song which sent Sri Ramakrishna into a thrill of ecstasy. The song contained in gist the philosophy of Life.

O my mind, go to your own abode  
In the foreign land of this world  
Why roam uselessly like a stranger!....

Explaining the profound idea Vivekananda said : "Work as if you were a stranger in this land, a sojourner; work incessantly, but do not bind yourselves; bondage is terrible. This world is not our habitation, it is only one of the many stages through which we are passing. ... The very reason of nature's existence is for the education of the soul; it has no other meaning; it is there because the soul must have knowledge, and through knowledge free itself."<sup>8</sup> There is a Jewish Hasidic saying : "A man must have two pockets into which he can reach at one time or another according to his needs. In his right pocket he must keep the words: 'For my

sake the world was created.' And in his left: 'I am dust and ashes.'"

We are too egoistic to deny the high opinion of ourselves. We complain, whine and lament over why we do not get what we want, as though we fully deserve more than others. We are apt to think that we are indispensable in the world, and the world should pay us homage for what little we do for it. But the world has not satisfied any human being. Further. It is neutral, indifferent. Man is not disturbed by things or events, but by the meaning and value he attaches to them. Our wrong perceptions ensure in our half-waking and half-dreaming hypnotic state. This hypnotism has, transgenerationally, been implanted in us. Each fresh generation thinks that its elders were wrong and it would certainly find lasting happiness from snatching and squeezing this world more. Like Sisyphus, it rolls a heavy stone up the side of a mountain, and when it gets to the top the stone will roll back down again. The next generation with full enthusiasm rolls up the heavy stone again. The very realization that in a temporary life there is neither lasting pleasure nor lasting misery brings peace and wisdom. This peace and wisdom is, as it were, more manifest in animals than in men; so he would prefer to live with them, merrily said the famous poet Walt Whitman.

I think I could turn and live with animals,  
They are so placid and self-contained,  
I stand and look at them long and long.  
They do not sweat and whine about their condition,  
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,  
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,  
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mists  
of owning things,  
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived  
thousands of years ago,  
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.<sup>9</sup>

Wisdom opens new vistas of life and elevates it to a state of play and fun. When life becomes fun, unnecessary dead-seriousness drops away; all whining and whimper evaporate; all crying and weeping for help vanish. Greed to grab and hoard disappear. Pleasure and pain alike lose their meaning. The whole world is seen as a vast play, vast fun. What other meaning can we ascribe to it? The whole universe is the play of Cosmic Mind. That one truth rings out again and again in Vedanta. It says life is a play; know is and play to your heart's content. Humour and hilarity are not only in slap-sticks, comic strips or jokes, but are in every event of life. It is an artificial life where everything is planned beforehand, and everything is prearranged meticulously as in a computer program. The funniest thing of our civilization is, even we have been coached how to laugh, at what, and how long; and when to smile and when not to. Every human response is controlled and manipulated. This machine-like conditioning limiting our lives, has sponged it out of freshness and spontaneity. Yet in spite of one's careful planning, life is full of uncertainties. It springs surprises and administers shocks to awaken us.

Young children do not search for motive or purpose for their actions. They are interested in everything they see and

hear; the world is full of surprises for them. They spend hours watching the flight of butterflies, changing colours of clouds, twinkling stars, movements of birds and many other things attractive to their eyes. They never complain why they were born in a poor family, nor rejoice at the affluence of their parents. They are happy as they are, without any comparisons, ambitions or worries. To the adult eye, wrapped in its own petty sorrows, there is nothing to cause delight. It is the grown up man who puts before him a mythical goal and pours every ounce of his energy to reach it, but never succeeds. As he proceeds the goal recedes farther and farther. It is a goal of his own unsubstantial projection, a chimera.

Sri Ramakrishna tells a humorous story of a magic jar.

A barber was once given by a Yaksha (geni) seven jars of gold. The barber opened them and found all full of gold except the last one which was only half full. A strong desire arose in the mind of the barber to fill the seventh jar also; for without it his happiness was incomplete. He put all his wife's ornaments and all his earnings into the jar, but the mysterious vessel, as before, remained unfilled. Starving himself and his family he saved money to fill the jar. At last he began to live by begging, still putting everything into the insatiable cavity. As days passed his miserable condition grew worse. The king noticed his careworn features and asked, "What is the matter with you? Have you got the seven jars?" The barber was awe-struck by the question and he confessed everything. The king said, "Go at once and return the jars to the Yaksha. Nobody can ever fill the mysterious jar." The barber did as the king advised and had peace.

The jar of desire to possess more and more things in order to derive happiness cannot be filled. It is only when we let go our hold that the fountain of joy gushes.

## 2. Summary

### People are strange

They do not realize their own unwise thinking brings unhappiness. Instead of deriving pleasure from what he has, comparing himself with his neighbours, he derives pain from what others have. He feels miserable thinking of his neighbour's car which he does not have. That neighbour feels anguish thinking of his next neighbour who has two cars while he has only one. And so on the chain of misery extends. Vivekananda told this funny story to illustrate.

A poor man was once able to propitiate a certain god who gave him three boons to ask along with three throws of dice. The happy man communicated this news to his wife who at once told him to cast for wealth first. To this the man said, "We both have very ugly little noses, for which people laugh at us. Let us first cast for beautiful aquiline noses." But the wife was for wealth first and so she caught hold of his hand to prevent him from throwing the dice. The man hastily snatched his hand away and threw the dice exclaiming. "Let us both have beautiful noses and nothing but noses." All at once both their bodies were covered over with many beautiful noses, but they proved such a great nuisance to them that both of them agreed to throw for the second time asking for their removal. It was done, but they



also lost their own little ones by that! There was only one boon more to ask. Having lost their noses they looked uglier than before. They wanted to have two beautiful noses, but they feared to be questioned about their transformation lest they should be regarded by all to be two big fools who could not mend their circumstances even with the help of three boons. So both of them agreed to get back the ugly little noses and the dice were accordingly cast.<sup>10</sup>

All our energies, hopes and aspirations are centred in the world. Even for a moment we can't forget the world and its miasmic bewitchments. Except in the state of deep sleep, the mind incessantly cerebrates. Even to get a few hours sound sleep has become a hard job and many have to resort to pill-popping. The world extracts its heavy price from us unless we learn to detach ourselves now and then from it. This, of course, is not through drugs and alcohol, "Drunkenness is temporary suicide," said Bertrand Russell. Workaholism too is a degenerative condition. Workaholics come under the illusion that their work is of tremendous importance and to ignore it even for a day would bring all kinds of disasters. Such deluded ones should visit the graveyard once to see those who have lived similarly lying there. Our doings are not so important as we naturally suppose. Our successes and failures or all other things that happen to oneself haven't any cosmic importance.

### 3. Conclusion

When the body is in sound health, we are no more conscious of body. When the mind is in a happy and euphoric state we are seldom aware of mind. This happens when the mind stops worrying about itself or about the world. Our minds are soaked and super-saturated with the world-its events and things, its emotions and quasirealities. There is hardly any empty space left inside. It is like the story of the Arab's camel. Once a camel just pushed its nose through the door of the Arab's tent. The Arab at once objected to this but the camel said, "Oh, I am only putting my nose into your room for a moment. Nothing more. But in fact it slowly pushed in its ugly head and then its whole body inside the tent. When the owner then began to vigorously protest, it said, "If you do not like my presence in your house you had better get out, but I will not."

Sri Ramakrishna unflaggingly pointed out the bane of worldly-mindedness, saying :

.....The souls that are entangled, involved in worldliness, never come to their senses. They lie in the net but are not even conscious that they are entangled. If you speak of God before them, they at once leave the place. They say : "Why God now ? We shall think of Him in the hour of death." But when they lie on their death-beds, they say to their wives or children : "Why have you put so many wicks in the lamp ? Use only one wick. Otherwise too much oil will be burnt." While dying they think of their wives and children, and weep, "Alas! What will happen to them after my death?"

The entangled souls repeat those very actions that make them suffer so much. They are like the camel which eats thorny bushes till the blood streams from its mouth, but still will not give them up. Such a man may have lost his son and be stricken with grief, but still he will have children

year after year. He may ruin himself by his daughter's marriage but still he will go on having daughters every year. When he goes to a holy place he doesn't have any time to think of God. He almost kills himself carrying bundles for his wife... They laugh at those who think of God and meditate on Him, and call them lunatics.<sup>11</sup>

Without kindling a spiritual spark or love of God in one's heart, one may try by whatever means one likes to derive happiness from the desert of the world. But without the spiritual orientation he only meets with frustration and misery. Mankind has tried again and again all the tricks history teaches, but without success. Yet, modern people may be awakening to the efficacy of the meditation or relaxation response as a great anodyne. Meditation is emptying of the mind of its contents. The contents are desires and longing for things, anxieties, stress, envy, fear, sorrows and so on. In the first two verses of the Dhammapada, Buddha says; "Mind is everything. Our life is the creation of our mind. If a man speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows him as the wheels of a cart follows the beast that draws it. If a man speaks or acts with a pure mind, joy follows him as his own shadow. The Pancadasi, an Advaita text enunciates; "The impure mind is that mind which is polluted by the world and the pure mind is the mind free from it." (X. 116)

Exhilaration and cheerfulness are our real nature, sorrow is superimposition of the world onto the Self. A mind which possesses nothing and is not possessed by anything is blissful.

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